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Views

A portfolio from around the nation

"Pass the word . . . Shultz is not one of us."

Gene Basset
Atlanta Journal
United Feature Syndicate

WASHINGTON POST
4 (MAGAZINE)
22 December 1985

SUICIDA'S SECRET WAR

How one contra got serious about the battle to oust the Sandinistas

BY CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

IN DECEMBER 1981, Ronald Reagan signed a presidential finding that established a force for "paramilitary operations" against Nicaragua. This force became known as the "contras" or "counterrevolutionaries." Originally planned as a 500-man, covert CIA operation aimed at stopping arms traffic from Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador, the "secret war" became a catch phrase for Washington's attempts to pressure, harass and destabilize the Nicaraguan government. By 1985, the contra fighting force had grown to an estimated 10,000 men.

The largest contra faction, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), operated out of Honduras crossing the border into Nicaragua to make raids on villages and Sandinista militia positions. Because U.S. support for the contras was part of a CIA-funded program, little was known initially about the FDN commanders, their forces and their tactics. Washington Post foreign correspondent Christopher Dickey was one of the first reporters to go behind contra lines.

In this excerpt from Dickey's book With the Contras, *we join one FDN force under the command of Pedro Pablo Ortiz Centeno, known to his men as "Suicida." A former member of dictator Anastasio Somoza-Debayle's National Guard, the most feared of Somoza's security forces, Suicida earned his nom de guerre by taking his men into battles—and winning them—when other commanders and their troops would have died on the battlefield. As a result, Suicida earned intense loyalty from his troops and those directly under him, his lieutenants Krill and Cancer, a loyalty surpassing that held by the men for the FDN itself. In their devotion to Suicida, these troops waged their own war, a war out of FDN control and, ultimately, beyond the scope of anything Washington had envisioned. Though the CIA and the FDN supported Suicida's war at first, ultimately Suicida and his men became a matter of international embarrassment for them.*

BY NOVEMBER 1982, Suicida had his men, he had his guns and he felt ready for his kind of war: big attacks looking for big wins. First they would eliminate the Sandinista outposts along the border, then they would push their forces deep inside the narrow northern tip of Nueva Segovia in Nicaragua. They would attack Jalapa itself. If they could take it, they would call in support on the airstrips around the town, and reinforcements overland from Honduras. They would declare a liberated territory. Then the war to oust the communists could get serious.

At FDN headquarters in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, however, there did not seem to be much enthusiasm for this idea. The general staff toyed with it. It sounded good. But the men at the other bases were still in training, and they did not want to act until everyone was ready—if then. In the middle of November, without orders from Tegucigalpa, and on his own account, Suicida began his infiltration and his offensive in the Segovias.

The initial attacks were small. Most of Suicida's new recruits were raw; many could not be relied on to fight. But the Sandinista forces they were up against were often half-trained militiamen as raw as anyone in their own ranks. As Suicida's people gained experience in little ambushes and engagements the scope of the fighting grew. Krill and Cancer were spearheading the operation, and well past Providencia they had yet to encounter major resistance. The only problem was ammunition. The new recruits wasted a lot and they were running out quickly. Suicida started calling to the other bases asking for support, trying to draw them into the fight. But one by one the responses came back over the radio. "Negative." Now he called Tegucigalpa. He had an offensive going. He was giving hell to the Sandinistas, couldn't they tell that? And, however reluctantly, they began diverting supplies to his camp to try to sustain him.

The general staff in Tegucigalpa had not known what to do about Suicida's offensive when it began. But they soon saw that, at least in the short term, it could give them the credibility they wanted as a fighting force. He was inside Nicaragua, he was fighting, and he was holding his own.

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War of Attrition

Washington turns the screws on the Sandinistas

BY ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Invasion, war of attrition, negotiation. Those are the three options the Reagan Administration has in Nicaragua. But since negotiation does not suit the Administration's style, it is seriously considering only the other two alternatives, which share the same objective: getting rid of the Sandinistas.

"There's a faction that wants to invade and another that thinks invasion is unwise," says Bill LeoGrande, a staff member of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. "But it isn't one department versus another; it cuts across departments and agencies." Battle lines are drawn between the advocates of invasion, who look for a symbolic "rollback" of the Soviet empire and a spectacular demonstration of American military prowess, versus the proponents of a war of attrition, who seek the slow strangulation of the Sandinistas.

"The result of the disagreement is that nothing happens," says LeoGrande. "It's a rut. Some want to push the policy out to the right, some want to push it to the left. But neither side can do it. So the policy stays where it is and keeps going forward. The policy is the synthesis of their disagreement."

Here are the major players:

Fred C. Ikle, Under Secretary for Policy at the Department of Defense, is the Pentagon's principal hawk, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff, still twinging from Vietnam, counsel caution. On the eve of his retirement in June, General Wallace H. Nutting, commander of Army and Air Force combat forces in the United States, strongly expressed his opposition to invasion and went so far as to suggest "that we are going to have to learn to live with Nicaragua."

Such diffidence has carried the day, at least so far. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger "usually follows the uniform guys," LeoGrande observes.

At the National Security Council, the President's national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, generally argues against invasion. But at the CIA, Director William Casey and other gung-ho types appear eager to send the troops in.

CIA analysts, however, recognize the many pitfalls of an invasion: another Vietnam-like quagmire, an explosive reaction in Latin America, the destabilization of many of its governments, and strong opposition here at home.

The State Department is thought to be the most dovish, although Secretary of State George Shultz plays his cards close to the vest. Rumors persist that Langhorne Motley, former Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, left his post last June because he favored negotiations with the Sandinistas. His successor, Elliott Abrams, has a reputation as a hard-liner.

At the distant fringe of the debate, an occasional voice suggests a deal with the six-year-old Sandinista regime: all Soviet and Cuban military advisers out of Nicaragua, a reduction in the Nicaraguan military, U.S. guarantees of Nicaraguan sovereignty, a "Finlandization" solution. But that is a voice in the wilderness.

Administration policy has meant continued funding for the *contras*, economic embargo, pressure on private and multilateral banks to limit loans, pressure on allied governments that try to maintain normal relations with the Sandinista government, t avel bans, and the prospect of breaking iplomatic relations. This policy of attrition aims to turn the screws so tightly that the Nicaraguan government will run out of resources, its people will rise up in frustration, the leaders of the revolution will turn against each other in fratricidal recrimination, and the Sandinistas will be squeezed dry and lifeless at the feet of the Yankee giant.

The policy is working. Mounting internal discontent has already led the Sandinista government to declare a state of emergency. In announcing the suspension of civil liberties in mid-October, President Daniel Ortega blamed U.S. meddling.

"To support the terrorist policy of the American leaders," Ortega said, "allies and agents of imperialism who act from some political parties, press outlets, or religious institutions, are stepping up their actions to sabotage national defense efforts, hinder our economic policies, and provoke discontent and confusion in the popular bases."

To some extent, U.S. policy toward Nicaragua results not so much from stalemate as from the gradual victory of a particular position.

"There is a new strategy at work in Nicaragua and Central America: low-intensity war," says Deborah Barry, an American analyst of U.S. foreign policy who lives in Nicaragua and works as a research fellow with the Regional Coordinating Council for Economic and Social Studies. "It's what was learned from Vietnam. It's not about gun-boats and invasions. It's a major shift from the concept of conventional warfare."

The doctrine of low-intensity war, Barry argues, refines the counterinsurgency theories of the Vietnam era. Its advocates are found in all of the national security agencies of the U.S. Government, though it is still little understood in the lesser bureau-

Continued

Robert Armstrong is the executive director of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), a New York research institute founded in 1966 to study U.S. hemispheric relations.